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AUTHOR Edwards, Suzanne O.
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ABSTRACT

Because of its wide range of justifiable interpretations, Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" is an appropriate novel to use to help students become better critical readers. Scholarly criticism continues to debate the topic of Tess's character, yet recent feminist and deconstructionist approaches, as well as recently published social histories and textual studies, give readers a different perspective on the subject. Teachers might explore these perspectives by giving a sequence of writing assignments that require students to confront the complexities of the text. To help students see how Hardy guides readers' perceptions of characters and events and how these interpretations develop as the story unfolds, instructors might invite students to analyze a motif--foreshadowing, patterns of color, or images of light and darkness--through the course of the entire novel. Students can be given the opportunity to wrestle with the ambiguities of the book by writing a series of papers discussing conflicting views of the reasons for Tess's suffering. Whatever topics are assigned, students will have to return to the text repeatedly to locate ample primary support for their readings. In the process they will become more independent and confident readers, taking more pleasure in the richness of the literature they read. (A 48-item reference list is appended.) (MM)

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Contemporary Interpretations of Tess of the d'Urbervilles: Implications for the Classroom

Suzanne O. Edwards
Department of English
The Citadel
Charleston, South Carolina

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Contemporary Interpretations of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: Implications for the Classroom

In the last decade so much exceptional Thomas Hardy scholarship has been published, it has been difficult to keep pace with it all. Hardy's literary and personal notebooks have been edited, and major new biographies--among them the standard life by Michael Millgate--have been written. Millgate is also responsible, with Richard Purdy, for the publication of Hardy's letters. So far six of the projected seven volumes have appeared, covering Hardy's correspondence up to 1925, just three years before his death. The release of Hardy's works from copyright in 1979 prompted a spate of new editions, including variorum texts of Hardy's poems and several of the novels. The variorum *Tess*, edited by Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell, appeared in 1983. Predictably, the publication of definitive editions of these primary materials has inspired equally impressive criticism. This paper is intended to help bring teachers up to date and suggest ways recent scholarship might be brought to bear on classroom instruction.

Interestingly enough, most contemporary critics of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* continue to debate the same topic that stirred controversy when the novel originally appeared in volume form in 1891--namely, whether Tess is in fact "a pure woman faithfully presented" as the subtitle claims. Today's critics are no more in agreement about whether Tess is an innocent victim or a well-intentioned but flawed tragic heroine than readers were nearly a century ago. Although the same subject is being debated, thanks

to recent critical approaches--feminist and deconstructionist--and to recently published social histories and textual studies, the reader of Tess in 1987 necessarily has a more enlightened perspective than previous readers.

A case in point is an invaluable 1975 study, The Shaping of Tess of the d'Urbervilles, in which J. T. Laird rehearses the complicated publication history of Tess. Even young readers should be aware of Hardy's struggles with the censors. Having been rejected in the autumn of 1889 by the editors of three magazines because of its scandalous plot, Tess was finally accepted by the editor of the Graphic when Hardy agreed to remove or rewrite several objectionable passages. He effected the mandated changes and Tess made its debut in weekly installments from July 4 to December 26, 1891. Perhaps the scene most famous for having been rejected by the editor of the Graphic is the one in part three when Angel Clare carries the milkmaids through a flooded field. Those familiar with the novel will recall that in their walk to church Tess and her three companions find their progress interrupted and are debating how to arrive at the service on time without soiling their Sunday clothes when Angel comes along and solves their dilemma by carrying each one in his arms through the stand of water. Since all four girls are in love with Angel, and Angel reveals his love for Tess in this scene, it proves to be a poignant one. Poignancy notwithstanding, Hardy, pressed to write out of the plot any physical intimacy between the young lovers, altered the passage. In the

serial version, the resourceful Angel looks about him and spies a wheelbarrow by which he transports each of the lovesick girls to dry ground.

While the demand for this change may strike the modern reader as little more than quaintly amusing, Hardy was forced to make other revisions, ones that radically altered plot development and character portrayal. As may be imagined, readers who would blush at the thought of Angel carrying Tess in his arms would never have been able to accept a heroine, who one-fourth of the way through the novel, becomes a kept woman and subsequently bears her seducer's illegitimate child. In place of the ambiguous seduction scene in The Chase, therefore, Hardy introduced into the serial version an unlikely mock marriage. He protected Tess's innocence by making her the unfortunate dupe of a sham ceremony contrived by Alec and by omitting any reference to the birth of a child. Hardy settled for printing the exorcised seduction and infant baptism scenes as independent sketches in two other periodicals. Curiously, the seduction scene was issued under the title "Saturday Night in Arcady" with a significant change in the portrayal of the fallen woman. In this version the shamed woman loses her independent spirit when she loses her good name and resorts to begging her seducer to protect her--a response to loss of virtue more typical of Victorian heroines than Tess's proud, scornful refusal of Alec's assistance in the novel. In most cases Victorian heroines who lost their virginity were depicted as chastened by their helpless condition. Even in

novels about bold New Women who defy conventional morality, the nineteenth-century heroine does not succeed in her attempt to live outside the established social code. Consistently, these rebellious women either die or repent by the end of the novel (Williams 50). Students might profitably be asked to explore why the same Victorian reader who would have objected to indirect references to sexual intimacy would have been delighted by the violence and lurid sensationalism of the murder scene at the end--by the image of a man, stabbed in the heart with a carving knife, whose blood spills upon the floor and soaks through to fashion a scarlet "ace of hearts" on the ceiling of the room below.

As it is, in its decidedly oblique rendering, the original seduction scene, restored by Hardy when the novel first appeared in volume form at the end of 1891, strikes a twentieth century reader as innocuous enough. After she is hired to tend poultry at the d'Urberville estate at Trantridge, Tess is repeatedly subjected to the sexual advances of the dashing but unprincipled Alec d'Urberville. She manages to resist him until late one night when she walks home from a barn dance with several coarse, working-class companions. Tess has the misfortune to arrouse the jealousy of one of the women, a former mistress of Alec's, and is threatened with physical assault when Alec appears on horseback, offering to take her home. Unable to resist the opportunity to triumph over her rival, Tess swings herself onto the back of Alec's horse and the two gallop away. Some time later Alec

declares he has lost his way in The Chase. He leaves Tess to rest in a nest of fallen leaves (the symbolism becomes especially blatant here) while he searches for the path leading out of the woods. Tess falls asleep while he is gone and awakens to his apparently insistent love making. Hardy describes the encounter thus at the close of chapter eleven:

> " Tess!' said d'Urberville.
>
> "There was no answer. The obscurity was now so great that he could see absolutely nothing but a pale nebulousness at his feet, which represented the white muslin figure he had left upon the dead leaves. Everything else was blackness alike. D'Urberville stooped and heard a gentle regular breathing. He knelt and bent lower, till her breath warmed his face, and in a moment his cheek was in contact with hers. She was sleeping soundly, and upon her eyelashes there lingered tears.
>
> "Darkness and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of The Chase, in which were poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap; and about them stole the hopping rabbits and hares."

At this point the narrator withdraws discreetly to contemplate Crass Casualty and social injustice.

> "But, might some say, where was Tess's guardian angel? where was the providence of her simple faith? Perhaps, like that other God of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke,

> he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or he was sleeping and not to be awaked."

The cynical narrator muses further:

> "Why was it that upon that beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. One may, indeed, admit the possibility of a retribution lurking in the present catastrophe. Doubtless some of Tess d'Urbervilles mailed ancestors rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time. But though to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children may be a morality good enough for divinities, it is scorned by average human nature; and it therefore does not mend the matter."

The narrator becomes so entangled in a maze of questions and speculations that the unwary reader may not even perceive that a seduction has occurred.

While most modern readers are not offended by The Chase scene, they may very well be confused by it. What does in fact happen? Is Tess raped or is she seduced? It is difficult to supply a definitive answer, for in this episode, as elsewhere in the novel, much of the action is hidden behind theoretical

musings of the narrator or takes place between chapters. Among the other incidents Hardy chooses not to describe are the weeks Tess spends with Alec at Trantridge after the loss of her virginity, the birth of her child, and her eventual return to Alec at the end of the novel (Brady 129). Moreover, as Kristin Brady notes, ". . . Tess's real thoughts and feelings are rarely presented in the novel, except when she suffers the consequences of her actions" (129, my italics). Frequently, we do not know of events or of Tess's attitudes toward them until after they have been shaped.

Yet the question--rape or seduction--remains an important one, for the answers to it determine our understanding of why Tess suffers so, which, J. Hillis Miller reminds us in Fiction and Repetition, is the central issue of the novel.

Critics, such as F. B. Pinion, who contend that Tess is raped point to her disdainful rejection of Alec as personal benefactor or husband, to her strong sense of shame, to Marlott village gossip that supposes "A little more than persuading had to do wi' the coming o't . . . . There were they that heard a sobbing one night last year in The Chase; and it mid ha' gone hard wi' a certain party if folks had come along." But other readers counter that Alec, though guilty of sexual harrassment, is hardly a rapist, that after all Tess remains with him for several weeks following the night they spend together in The Chase and accepts gifts from him. In Bert Hornback's words, "She has a mind of her own: a conscience and a consciousness" (109).

Kristin Brady advances the compelling notion that Hardy's presentation of Tess is ambivalent because Tess's own reactions to her experiences are ambivalent. "What distinguishes her from other seduced maidens [in literature] is also what makes her such a dangerous subject for fiction: that she could have sexual responses, though of varying intensities and kinds, to two different men" (129). Like most of us, Tess exhibits contradictory impulses. As Brady points out, Tess is presented as both innocent and sexual. There is a persistent "tension in her between passivity and assertion, between submission and independence, between dream and reality" (Brady 134). The ambiguity may also stem from Victorian views of female sexuality. Maggie Humm suggests that "In Tess of the d'Urbervilles . . . Hardy presents a series of expectations, of conventional male views of female behaviour in sexuality, morality, and marriage and shows how these dictated women's own attitudes and reactions (41, my italics). In Hardy's late novels, Humm says, "Women do not question social or moral values per se, but their own ability or inadequacy in matching them" (47). According to Humm's interpretation, therefore, Tess's own views are confused because they are formed by the conflicting views of those, especially the men, around her.

Some scholars, most notably J. T. Laird, have argued that Tess is an especially complex character because Hardy's intentions changed as he wrote her story. As he reworked scenes to make the novel acceptable for serialization, Hardy--in the

words of Marlene Springer--"progressively refined his concept of Tess as a pure woman . . . [and] correspondingly debased Alec and Angel" (122). Though some of the more titillating scenes I have discussed were reinserted, many of the more subtle purifying changes were retained when the novel was published in book form. One explanation often advanced is that Hardy himself became deeply attached to the character he created. In a letter to Sir George Douglas, Hardy says of Tess, "I . . . lost my heart to her as I went on with her history"; and writing to Thomas MacQuoid he confesses, "I have not been able to put on paper all that she is, or was, to me."

The only certainty is that Tess is an extraordinarily complex heroine. Therefore, as J. Hillis Miller cautions us, the reader of Thomas Hardy seeking a single explanation will fail to find one. "The problem is not that there are no explanations proposed in the text, but that there are too many" (140). He continues, ". . . it is wrong in principle to assume that there must be some single accounting cause. For Hardy, the design has no source" (141). We may remember that Tess proclaims herself a victim. "Once victim, always victim--that's the law," she shouts at Alec. And our final glimpse of her at Stonehenge, prostrate on one of the stone slabs presumably used centuries before for pagan offerings, presents an emblem of her as sacrificial victim. But by what or whom is she victimized--by men, by Society, by Crass Casuality, by her d'Urberville heritage, by her own past? Tess seems destined to tragedy for many reasons.

Where does this multiplicity of interpretations leave us in the classroom? I would like to suggest that it leaves us in an ideal position for teaching the reading process. Studies conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicate that we have done a commendable job of teaching our students to read for the main point--to extricate facts, to summarize. But we have not done well in teaching them higher order reading skills--analysis, synthesis, evaluation--the very skills essential to the successful reading of literature. Our students can tell us the plot of a novel or story, but they cannot use evidence from the fiction to explain what that plot "means." They are often unable to draw inferences and unwilling to offer interpretations. As Anthony Petrosky argues in a 1982 essay entitled "Reading Achievement," teachers must design tests and composition assignments that give young readers practice in developing their own responses to what they read.[1]

Tess is an appropriate novel to use because it invites a variety of readings. By exploring with students a novel that allows a range of justifiable interpretations--for which in fact there is no one correct interpretation--we can help them become better critical readers. In addition to asking objective recall questions on study guides and examinations, the teacher might give a sequence of writing assignments that require students to confront the complexities of the text. To help them see how Hardy guides our perceptions of characters and events over several hundred pages and how our interpretations continue to

develop as the story unfolds, instructors might invite students to analyze a motif through the course of the entire novel: foreshadowing, patterns of color, or images of light and darkness, for instance. They might be given the opportunity to wrestle with the ambiguities of the book by writing a series of papers discussing conflicting views of the reasons for Tess's suffering: is she fated or flawed, is she victim or vixen, does she inherit her problems or does she create them? Whatever topics they are given, students should be forced to return to the text again and again to locate ample primary support for their readings. In the process we will be helping our students become more independent and confident readers who will undoubtedly take more pleasure in the richness of the literature they read.

NOTE

[1]Anthony R. Petrosky, "Reading Achievement," Secondary School Reading, eds. Allen Berger and H. Alan Robinson (Urbana: ERIC, 1982) 17-18.

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